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Loving Our Snow Geese To Death

by Maureen Pierre

The Skagit Habitat Management Area in northwestern Washington is best known to many people as the winter home of the snow geese. Each autumn the birds migrate from their nesting grounds on Wrangel Island, off the coast of Siberia, to wintering areas along the Pacific Coast of Canada, Washington, Oregon and northern California. During most years, about 25,000 of the birds inhabit Skagit and Port Susan bays from late September to mid-April. The flock supports a hunting season from October to early January, after which the birds rest and feed for several months in preparation for the arduous 3,000-mile return flight to Wrangel Island.

During the summer of 1981, the birds had an especially productive nesting season, and Soviet biologists told their counterparts in this country to expect an unusually large flock. But no one was quite prepared for the thousands of snow geese that descended daily onto the Skagit flats — some 74,700 in all. Within two weeks, about 35 percent of them moved on to winter in northern California. It was the first time on record that snow geese bound for wintering areas farther south used the Skagit as a stopover.

An unusually large gathering of 47,000 geese remained, attracting an unusual amount of attention. The beautiful

white birds became subjects of extensive news media coverage, which drew crowds of people to the Skagit. People came on foot and in cars, boats and small planes to hunt, photograph and watch the birds.

Biologists believe it is partly because of all the attention and subsequent human harassment the birds suffered last winter that there are far fewer snow geese on the Skagit flats this year.

Snow geese have no doubt migrated annually according to the same schedule and along the same routes for thousands of years. Recently biologists in the United States, Canada and the Soviet Union have begun managing the birds cooperatively on an international basis, through the Wrangel Island Snow Goose-Pacific Flyway Management Plan, which aims at maintaining and enhancing this population of snow geese "for all of its values to society."

They are striving to maintain and increase winter habitat in California and Oregon and encouraging new nesting colonies in the birds' historical breeding range on Wrangel Is-

Last year the Skagit snow geese became subjects of extensive news media coverage and drew crowds of people.





land, on the Siberian mainland and in Alaska. The biologists are also working to maintain the quantity and quality of habitat needed to accommodate up to 200,000 snow geese in migration to and from Wrangel Island.

From 1970 to 1976, according to reports by Soviet biologists, the flock dwindled drastically, mainly because of harsh weather conditions and natural predators on Wrangel Island. In 1979, as a result of Soviet predator control programs and hunting restrictions imposed both by them and by wildlife managers here, the snow geese showed a significant recovery. Then, during the summer of 1981, weather conditions permitted an unusually productive year, leading to the record-breaking migration to the Skagit river delta and the other Pacific wintering areas.

From the onset of their arrival on the Skagit flats last fall, and starting with the unprecedented stopover by birds bound for wintering areas in Oregon and northern California, the geese deviated from their traditional behavior patterns, making it difficult for biologists to predict what they would do. In other years they had arrived and set up house-keeping on the deltas far from hunters' guns and photographers' cameras. There they would peacefully feed on vegetation in the estuaries until the food ran out. Around Christmas, the birds would begin moving inland where they could be hunted for a few weeks. An average year would see 2,500 of the geese harvested by hunters.

But last year the flock included an exceptionally high percentage of juvenile birds. Unlike the older birds, which somehow always seemed to know where the firing lines were, the juveniles were more readily decoyed, and they flocked to new resting areas where they were easy prey to unexpectedly high numbers of hunters. To complicate matters, duck hunting was slow on the Skagit last winter, so many duck hunters switched to snow geese.

Some 30,000 waterfowlers — many of them attracted by the publicity — came to the Skagit to hunt the geese. With so many hunters hunting so many geese, the Game Department pressed wildlife agents,

wildlife control agents and habitat managers into service to help biologists conduct daily car counts and bag checks. More than 14,000 snow geese — 68 percent of them juveniles — had been bagged by December 20, when wildlife managers closed the season early.

But that was just the beginning of their problems. After a hunting season, the snow geese need time to rest and build up reserves of body fat to sustain them on their spring migration. But the same barrage of publicity about the geese that swelled the ranks of hunters of the Skagit also attracted unprecedented numbers of bird watchers, nature lovers, photographers and the curiosity sightseers.

One day, as state wildlife biologist Mike Davison monitored a group of about 5,000 geese in a field near a main road, he saw them disturbed by people 19 times in six hours — in most cases by photographers who intentionally flushed the birds so they could get more spectacular photos. Frequently throughout the winter, Davison would count up to 18 cars parked along that same road, all belonging to people who came to see the geese.

In other instances, people who came to see the geese carried off armfuls of the bulrushes and other vegetation that makes up the birds' food supply and natural cover. Observers who stayed in or near their cars didn't disturb the geese, but these were in the minority.

The geese also suffered harassment by small aircraft that repeatedly — and illegally — buzzed the flocks, flushing them from the fields where they were trying to rest. Power boats continually ripped through the flocks on the water, disturbing and injuring them.

Biologists believe the stress the snow geese suffered at the hands of humans last winter was a major reason for their poor production on the nesting grounds the following summer. According to Soviet reports, Wrangel island was subjected to late snowfalls at the start of the nesting season and more harsh weather during the rest of the spring and summer. The Soviets also reported that relatively few breeding pairs of snow geese arrived at Wrangel Island in the spring. Apparently weakened by stress, the mated pairs that did return

had little success in raising young.

Of course, weather, predators and harassment by humans are not the only threats to the snow geese: Habitat is being destroyed for commercial and industrial land development. Lands that are critical to the flocks' migration are passing into private hands, creating concerns about how these lands can be managed for the geese. Chronic and acute oil pollution affects many locations along the snow geese's migration routes. The Skagit delta food chain is being altered by the presence of introduced plant species. And Wrangel Island nesting colonies face disturbance by reindeer herds and predation by arctic foxes.

Meanwhile, despite nagging language translation problems, biologists on both continents are looking for ways to enhance the snow goose population. To help gather more information about the birds' behavior and migration patterns, Soviet biologists are banding birds on Wrangel Island. Hunters who harvest banded birds are being asked to return the bands to their state's or country's wildlife agency.

Here in Washington, wildlife managers are trying to reduce disturbance of snow geese by humans on the Skagit delta. For instance, John Garrett, manager of the Game Department's Skagit Habitat Management Area, has been instrumental in negotiations with the Federal Aviation Administration to have flight maps changed to reduce harassment by people in small planes.

But although the work of wildlife biologists is important to the future of the Skagit snow geese, the cooperation of the general public is crucial to their success.

"Everyone impacts the birds," biologist Davison said. "Every person thinking of visiting the birds this year should realize that they will definitely impact those birds and ultimately affect their breeding success. When the snow geese arrive here, they face a wide variety of environmental stresses, and how well they endure dictates their general physical condition for that return 3,000-mile trip and their mating success in the spring.

"It's our responsibility to see that they return in good shape." □